

Record Looming, Dingell Looks To Refocus As A Member, Particularly On Health Care

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by Richard E. Cohen

As Rep. **John Dingell**, D-Mich., looks back on his record-breaking career, he lists the late Rep. Sam Rayburn, D-Texas, as the first and the best of the nine House speakers under whom he has served. And he added that the House was a better place when he began serving in December 1955.

That's nothing against his current colleagues or **House Speaker Pelosi** -- with whom he has had notable conflicts -- insisted the House's most senior member, who is scheduled on Feb. 11 to become its all-time dean. In his early days, "there was a particular attention to the House as an institution: its rules, its behavior, its mores were very important.... The place worked."

Now, he added, "Where we used to have long and thorough debates with open rules, we don't anymore. ... Members don't get to know each other anymore. The great friendships that used to exist don't anymore, at least in the numbers or the intensity." He dates this chiefly to the mid-1990s, when former Rep. **Newt Gingrich**, R-Ga., was speaker.

As has been the case since he succeeded his father, Rep. **John Dingell Sr.**, who died at age 61 in 1955 as the No. 2 Democrat on the House Ways and Means Committee, national health-insurance remains Dingell's passion. And he voiced fear that recent talk of delaying House action until next year could create "a strong possibility" of an election-year outcome similar to the 1994 defeat of President Bill Clinton's healthcare plan. President Obama "needs to move as fast as he knows how," he said.

Dingell offered these and other thoughts in a 45-minute interview in his office on the eve of surpassing the late Appropriations Chairman Jamie Whitten, D-Miss., who served 53 years and two months before he retired in January 1995 as the House member who has served the longest.

Longest-Serving Members of the House

Representative	Years Served	Total
John Dingell, D-Mich.	12/13/55 present	53 yrs
Jamie Whitten, D-Miss.	1/24/34 12/19/95	53
Carl Albert, D-Ala.	1/23/14 12/1/95	50
Emmanuel Celler, D-N.Y.	3/4/12 12/1/37	50
Sam Rayburn, D-Texas	3/4/12 12/1/38	49
Bill West, D-La.	12/1/49 12/1/99	48
Wright Patman, D-Texas	3/4/12 3/1/38	47
Joseph Cannon, R-Ill.	3/4/12 3/3/12	46
Albion S. Barkley, D-La.	3/4/12 11/6/12	46
John Conyers, D-Mich.	12/1/66 present	44

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It's an extraordinary mark for the 82-year-old, who was a prolific and often-feared baron of the House for 28 years before the Democratic Caucus replaced him in November as chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee. But it also has come at a time of other personal setbacks, including knee surgery and rehabilitation, plus the free-fall of his

hometown automobile industry, which has made Michigan the nation's economic basket case.

The record itself means little, Dingell said. "A man is better remembered for what he did rather than for how long it took him to do it." And he quickly added, "I am a very lucky guy." The first example he cited was his unexpected victory in a redistricting-forced 1964 match-up against a more senior House Democrat in a neighboring district -- where race, including their opposite votes on that year's landmark Civil Rights Act, was a key issue; Dingell favored the measure, a controversial vote in his racially divided district.

The late Rep. John Lesinski Jr., his opponent, had served seven terms. Ironically, both he and Dingell succeeded their fathers, each of whom first took office as the New Deal started in 1933.

His bruising contest with Rep. **Henry Waxman**, D-Calif., for the Energy and Commerce chairmanship surely left hard feelings. But with his wife, Debbie, a longtime executive with General Motors who remains his closest adviser, Dingell has told colleagues that he is "moving on," and that he wants to be the most effective lawmaker possible in this Congress.

Waxman sought to promote that healing with a ceremonial presentation to Dingell of the gavel that he had used since taking over the panel's chairmanship. "They don't make gavels like this anymore, and they don't make legislators like **John Dingell** anymore," Waxman told the committee. The two of them have had seemingly amiable chats about committee business in recent weeks, including on the House floor.

But, as Dingell acknowledged, his duties and influence as "chairman emeritus" remain to be seen. "I don't know what it means. There has never been a chairman emeritus around here, and there may never be one again," he said. "I was a longtime and effective member before I was chairman of anything. I intend to be an effective member of Congress now without being chairman of anything. I am not a collector of empty honors."

In addition to health care, his priorities are a bill that he has filed with Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee Chairman **Frank Pallone**, D-N.J., and Oversight and Investigations Chairman **Bart Stupak**, D-Mich., on his long-standing interest in reforming the FDA, plus the expected package on energy independence and climate change, which Waxman has said the committee will complete by Memorial Day.

If ill will lingers following the ouster of Dingell, it may be among his loyal allies, some of whom were taken aback by Waxman's challenge. Energy and Commerce Communications Subcommittee Chairman **Rick Boucher**, D-Va., has said that legislating with Dingell was like "playing baseball with Babe Ruth."

Immediately after the Nov. 20 Democratic Caucus vote, a stunned Rep. **Stephanie Herseth Sandlin**, D-S.D., the co-chairwoman of the Blue Dog Coalition, said, "There's no reason in terms of qualifications, competency and effectiveness to take someone who embodies the history of the modern Congress and deny him the chairmanship."

Dingell, who said that he had no warning of Waxman's challenge, added that he remains proud of his accomplishments, including those in the past Congress. And he said that he has given no thought of his future -- either in seeking another term, or perhaps resigning

before the end of his current term. In either case, he added, breaking the longevity record is "not really" likely to affect his decision.



Dingell Reflects On Long House Career

THE MICHIGAN REPRESENTATIVE LOOKS BACK ON A TENURE THAT NOW SPANS SIX DECADES

Tuesday, Feb. 3, 2009

Next week, Rep. John **Dingell**, D-Mich., will surpass former Appropriations Committee Chairman Jamie Whitten, D-Miss., who served 53 years and two months before he retired in January 1995, as the longest-serving House member. It's an extraordinary mark for the 82-year-old **Dingell**, who succeeded his father, John Dingell Sr., after he died in 1955. *National Journal's* Richard E. Cohen interviewed Dingell last week as he looked back on his record-breaking career. Edited excerpts follow. Visit the Insider Interviews section for previous discussions in this series.

NJ: What is the significance of your achievement of being the all-time dean of the House?

Dingell: A man is better remembered for what he did rather than for how long it took him to do it. First of all, I am a very lucky guy. My choice of fathers was an excellent one. My choice of wives was a superb one. If I look back I see God has been good to me at almost every turn in the road.... At every turn, there was something special happening that was looking after me.

NJ: Can you give me an example or two?

Dingell: A terrible election in '64 when they gave me a 1 in 15 chance of winning [in a post-redistricting contest against another incumbent]. I won. That was the time I voted for the civil rights bill and my opponent voted against it.... There was a big hunk of the district in the city. There were the usual racial tensions that existed. But we won because we told people, "Why is it that a white man should be able to vote and a black man should not?" About 10 percent of the district was black then.

NJ: What about your career in the House stands out as most memorable?

Dingell: I have been very fortunate in being able to do things. I was one of the leaders of the '57 civil rights bill and was very much involved in the '64 and '65 civil rights measures. I ran a little subcommittee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee and wrote the National Environmental Policy Act, major parts of the fish and wildlife act, the Endangered Species Act, ocean dumping,

marine mammals.... I did those things. I wrote them.... I wrote most of the last Food and Drug bill in '62.

NJ: How did your influence change when you became a committee chairman?

Dingell: Being committee chairman allows you to do a lot of things that you can't do when you are an ordinary member.... The House has changed. When Dad came here [as a House member in 1933], he had one room, one electric fan, one secretary, one typewriter and one round-trip ticket to his district every year. So you came down here and stayed until it was time to go home because you couldn't afford to travel. When I came, I had four typewriters and four staffers. Things began to change.

[In the '64 contest], I spent \$35,000 -- and I thought that was an absolutely terrifying number. In 2002 [in a contest against another House Democratic member], we spent about \$3 million, which is a terrifying number.

NJ: What about the changes in the House, in terms of how work gets done? Are they for the better or worse?

Dingell: I am an institutionalist. I love the House.... I liked the way that [Sam] Rayburn and John McCormack ran the place. [Newt] Gingrich essentially remade it. And now it runs the way that Gingrich set it up. That is no criticism of Nancy [Pelosi]. That's the way things happened.

NJ: What did you like in particular about the way Sam Rayburn and John McCormack ran the House?

Dingell: Well, there was a particular attention to the House as an institution: Its rules, its behavior, its mores were very important. There were tremendous friendships and enmities that grew around here, but the place worked.

[The change] is a phenomenon that Nancy has to live with, as opposed to something which she created.

NJ: Both Gingrich and Pelosi have been stronger Speakers.

Dingell: The Speaker is immensely stronger.

NJ: Too strong?

Dingell: No. Again, this is a phenomenon of the time. There never was a stronger Speaker than Rayburn, but Rayburn recognized the limits within which he functioned. That has changed because the way the House functions has changed.... It used to be that most members came and stayed. Now most members are Tuesday through Thursday -- and that even includes me from time

to time. That has changed the way the business of the House is scheduled. It means that where we used to have long and thorough debates with open rules, we don't anymore. Again, this is not the fault of the Speaker. She is living with the world as it is and the way the House has changed. Members don't get to know each other anymore. The great friendships that used to exist don't anymore, at least in the numbers or the intensity.

NJ: Will 2009 be a time for great legislating?

Dingell: I certainly hope so. And I certainly am going to do everything I can to make it so. The numbers are there, and our leadership is determined to make things happen.... I am drafting a letter to the president now telling him that he has to start on his health care package.

NJ: Your good friend House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said last year that health care might not come to the floor until next year.

Dingell: An election year is not necessarily a good year to bring that kind of a bill to the floor. I would like to have it earlier. If it comes next year, there is a strong possibility that the same forces that were at play on the Clinton bill will be unleashed on this bill.

NJ: What did you think about the fact that no House Republicans voted for the economic stimulus bill?

Dingell: That told you about the relationship that is going to exist between the Republicans and the Democrats. I saw the same thing when I was a page boy in '36.... In my youth, I thought Republicans just were against everything.... I have been able to work with my Republican colleagues. But it takes a lot of care working with the minority party. First, you have to build trust. Then you have to find the common ground.

NJ: Could more have been done with the stimulus bill?

Dingell: I don't know because I didn't handle it.... It tells me that there is a strong possibility of big problems lying in the future. I am not going to criticize my leadership or the Republican leadership. I'm just going to tell you that it's a bad sign.

One of the formative events of my life was the Depression. And I saw what the Depression did to the country. The New Deal -- my dad and the others who were involved -- did two things. They tried to find out what happened so that they could see that it didn't happen again. And they tried to make substantive structural changes in government.... When [Herbert] Hoover was president, the Depression probably would not have been so long or so severe if he had not

tried to balance the budget or increase taxes.... Probably a third of the banks failed.

NJ: What is the lesson of that for us now?

Dingell: Nobody knows how many banks are solvent.

NJ: Are you worried?

Dingell: Of course. So is everybody else. That is why people have stopped spending, and they are saving everything that they can.... The New Deal did a lot of things. They set up the Home Owners Loan Corporation. They saved homes and made money, believe it or not. They saved businesses and made money for the government. The spending programs built roads and built ships for the war. It built infrastructure for the country.

NJ: Should there be more spending in this stimulus bill?

Dingell: The hard fact is that putting money into public works gets more money into society than do tax cuts. You get more bang for the buck.

NJ: What are the prospects for a climate change bill? Can Chairman Henry Waxman achieve his goal of the Energy and Commerce Committee reporting a bill by Memorial Day?

Dingell: I hope that he succeeds. The chairman controls the time. We had submitted [last year] to the House a very good draft of a bill, with some eight white papers. It had the support of both the greens and industry. It would be a fine starting point.... If Henry doesn't start with that bill, he will have to spend more time developing a bill and then trying to develop a consensus.

NJ: Some people have been critical of the Michigan delegation and your dealings as a group with the auto industry.

Dingell: I have warned the auto industry for years of the need for them to recognize the changes that are going on. Let me remind you that when I have worked on legislation that has related to them, it has always carried them as far as anybody else in the world is going. It has been done in a way which makes it possible for everything to be accomplished without destroying jobs and industry. My job is to see that things were done in the best way.... If you look at a pre-'68 car, which was before Clean Air, it was unsafe, it was dirty and it was fuel-inefficient.

NJ: Could more have been done over the years to move the auto industry?

Dingell: We have done a very good job in meeting the needs of the country.... I haven't seen anybody forced into an SUV or a pickup. They choose the car that they want. In a free society, the auto industry builds the car that they want. Otherwise, they don't stay in business. You live in a free nation, not a dictatorship.

NJ: You have co-sponsored a major reform of the Food and Drug Administration. Will this be a focus of yours?

Dingell: A major focus. They are killing Americans, Food and Drug is. They don't have the money. The agency is not doing the job. The Department of Agriculture inspects dog food manufacturers oftener than Food and Drug inspects food processors and pharmaceuticals.... There is no adequate inspection. I intend to try to change that.

NJ: What is in your future?

Dingell: I want to be the best congressman I can for the 15th District.

NJ: Could you imagine seeking another term, or voluntarily not serving this full term?

Dingell: God almighty, the people of the 15th District, the lovely Deborah [Dingell] and I will make that decision. It is not made now.... I think about it all the time. I began to think when I was first elected how long I would stay.

NJ: Does breaking the record affect how you think about that?

Dingell: Not really.... We haven't addressed that yet.

NJ: What does it mean to be a chairman emeritus?

Dingell: I don't know what it means. There has never been a chairman emeritus around here before, and there may never be one again. I was a long-time and effective member of Congress before I got to be chairman of anything. I intend to be an effective member of Congress now without being of chairman of anything. I am not a collector of empty honors. I am a fellow who is here because he wants to solve problems.... I want national health insurance. I want a decent energy and climate change bill. I want major change in the food and drug law.... I am also going to get a national battlefield park because my people at home want it.

NJ: If you had known in advance that Mr. Waxman was going to challenge you, might the outcome have been different?

Dingell: No, I did the best job that I could. I didn't run a defensive operation to try to beat Henry. You look at last year's activity report of this committee and

you'll find we did an extraordinary job.... I have never been one to run from a fight. But I didn't know that it was coming.